

NAVIGATE NOVELLING WILDERNESS  
AND BECOME A STORY SURVIVAL EXPERT



**HOW TO  
BUILD A  
NOVEL**

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# INTRODUCTION

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You've decided to write a novel. Maybe you spent a week filling a backpack with plot, character, fragments of inspiration, maybe all you did was pull on some hiking boots and stamp flaky dirt out of them. Maybe you're standing at the edge of the forest and the trees towering over you seem awfully tall - a whole book's worth of words? And they all have to make sense? Maybe you're already hiking through the undergrowth - you have been for a day, or a week, or a year. Maybe *more*. All the trees look the same. You're invigorated, but tired. Hungry. Lost. You started with a magical idea, but since you've started to write it's only become muddy and boring. You can't seem to get to the HEART of your story, maybe it feels like you're treading water, or you've hit the mid-novel blues, or you've already finished the first draft but it looks like a sad, saggy real life bacon cheeseburger compared to the fluffy, mouthwatering poster image you had in your head.

Maybe you've already found your way through novelling wilderness once before. Or more. But know you could have done it better, faster, coming out with fewer stinging scratches on your hands, with your clothes and your wits still intact, triumphant and exhilarated rather than hopelessly exhausted.

I'm sure you've heard a dozen metaphors for writing a novel before - I don't pretend this one is more true than any other. But a story *is* a journey, and so is writing one. And just like you can set yourself up for a great adventure by putting a little thought into how you'll get to those breathtaking viewpoints and how you'll get home before the rain soaks all the fun out of it, you can gather a story survival kit to help you stay on track, stay excited about your story, and ensure you reach the finish line without major disaster.

No plan ever survives contact with the enemy intact, but those with no plan get eaten. Okay, so your chances of being eaten by a bear while writing your novel are... below average. But your story can eat you. You love your story. You want it to succeed. But believe me, you can absolutely screw up the process of writing it badly enough you'll end up hating it. And writing. (And yourself.)

I don't claim to be the world's foremost expert here, I'm not the Bear Grylls of novelling - but I'm sure as hell not Carrie Bradshaw trying to wrench her stiletto out of the mud either. I've spent seven years writing novels, seven years of reading, learning and experimenting. Making mistakes, finding successes, honing my craft. Building myself the tools I need for my own story survival. There's no bigger learning curve than being dumped out the back of a truck into a thousand square miles of narrative wilderness like I was when I decided to take on NaNoWriMo in 2009. These are the things I wish I'd known the first time around. I can't teach my past self these tools and skills and erase my own frustrating, infuriating, wasted time. But I *can* leave markers for other writers who might follow my trail - WARNING: Don't fall into this ditch. It's cold, smelly, and it took me two months to pull myself out of it.

How to Build a Novel is all the most important things I've learned about building a book so far. I learned to read the stars, and you can too.



## HOW TO BUILD A NOVEL

This book is a companion to and expansion of my How to Build a Novel video series over at [youtube.com/RachaelStephen](https://youtube.com/RachaelStephen). If it seems like a good idea, you can subscribe to my youtube channel, or join [my mailing list](#).

If you paid any amount for this book - thank you so incredibly much! You're a superstar, and every penny contributes to my ability to create great videos and novels for you. If you didn't pay any dollar for this book - don't worry! I know exactly what it's like to want to support all your favourite creators when you just can't spare the money - it's real tough, and I completely understand. I didn't want to limit the number of people I could help with How to Build a Novel by sticking it behind a paywall. Here are a bunch of free ways you can support me and promote my ability to keep creating, if you are so inclined:

- Review *State of Flux* on Amazon and Goodreads. It doesn't have to be long! A star rating and a single, honest sentence is enough - indie authors live and die by reviews so these are incredibly useful to me.
- Share my channel, or one of my videos video on social media. It's especially helpful if you add a line about why you like it/what you get out of it. You can even tag people you know who might want to take note.
- Recommend an IRL friend. Know someone who'd like my stuff? Get personal and ask them to check it out - the chances of hooking someone up with stuff they love is so much higher than a blanket status update.
- Ask your local library or bookstore to order or stock *State of Flux*.

Thanks from the bottom of the infinite void where my heart should be,

Rachael

# WHY SHOULD YOU BUILD A NOVEL BEFORE WRITING IT?

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If you're writing a novel you will have to build all of it at some point, right? Whether you plan it first, or do it all as you go, or do the bulk of it in revision, it's the same amount of work whichever stage in the process you choose to do it, isn't it?

No, it's not.

The more story problems you solve and things you build *before* you start drafting, the less work you are making for yourself. If you try and figure out all those story issues *after* your draft, you're working on top of a bunch of wrong words. And words already written have *gravity*. If you've ever had to cut out a significant chunk of your novel because it was crap, you'll know what I'm talking about. Just by virtue of them *being* there, those already-written words take up space in your brain, and beg you to *fix* them instead of *dumping* them. But fixing instead of overhauling can hold you back, and prevent you from creating the best book you possibly can. Because no matter how ruthless you think you are, those already written words hold weight. Because if you dump them, you've *wasted your time on them*. Nobody likes throwing out work. Nobody likes throwing out what might be hours, days, weeks, *months of their time and effort*. It's painful, it's like admitting *failure*, or *defeat*. If you had to work hard to carve out the time to even write those words, this stings even more.

But those words will take you much longer, and much more effort, to **fix**, than it would have taken you to plan and write them the **right** way the first time.

Take it from the woman who wrote a whole 100,000 crappy words of a novel in 2009's NaNoWriMo, and had to spend **over four years** fixing them because of that.

So. We've established planning saves you time and effort. So... how do you know *what* to plan? A novel is a massive undertaking - a big clockwork giant with so many little ticking pieces it can seem impossible to know where to start. The short answer is that you plan *substance*, not *texture*.

All the information in a novel can (roughly) be divided into *substance* and *texture*.

**Substance** is the STRUCTURE of your story, the motives of the protagonist, the conflicts which arises, plot points, **bones**. Everything which *supports* your story, to the point that you couldn't remove it without another element crumbling.

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## THE PROCESS

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Use brainstorming to build  
CORE STORY ELEMENTS >>

MOTIVE, CONFLICT & EFFECT

>> Then ORGANISE those  
elements into an OUTLINE.

## HOW TO BUILD A NOVEL

**Texture** is everything *aesthetic* about the novel. The very words you use. Details of character description, setting, world building, mood, vibe. Everything which adds atmosphere and makes your story more visceral, sensational or aesthetically interesting. Texture isn't bones, it's **eyeliner. Fashion.**

Now obviously these two will interact and muddy the lines a bit - a character's skin colour is an aesthetic element of their description - but it can also have a huge impact on the substance of the story depending on how their culture treats skin colour. The point is definitely not to start dissecting your writing to determine *what* exactly counts as substance and what counts as texture.

The distinction is useful only because when you're *planning* your novel, you need to be building substance, not texture. Texture still needs to be built at some point! But you can do this *while* you write, and nothing all that bad will happen.

But if you try to build substance on the fly while you write? Most of the time you'll fuck up. Sorry, man. It's just true. You have to build the bones before you can start picking out eyeshadows, pal.

Substance is complicated, and it needs a lot of thought and working to make it good, to make all those cogs and components work together and tick along nicely. Most of us aren't magical geniuses who can hold all that in our heads at one time. And not only that - all the *substantial* elements of your book should be connected. Which means if you change one thing halfway through a draft, it has a ripple effect on the rest of the story. Guess what that means? More wasted words.

So you work it out on paper (or whatever) first, and then when you're drafting, you have space to think about all the other shit which will make your novel great: voice, mood, description, style, metaphor, demonic sigils sketched in goat's blood.

So, how do you build a novel?

Use brainstorming techniques to build the essential *substance* of your story. In the rest of this book, I'll explain how to brainstorm (with laser-like focus) the biggest chunks of substance you need to get started with your novel. I call these Core Story Elements, and they are **Motive** (your characters), **Conflict** (all the awful/wonderful things you'll *do* to your characters) and **Effect** (what will *happen* to those characters as a result).

I'll show you exactly how all these elements work, how to create them, and how to take them all and make them into a flexible outline which will get you through the drafting process without falling into crevasses, getting chased by swarms of wasps or being mugged by wolves.